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Behind the type

An attack on credibility

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George Bush, Central Intelligence Agency director, got a few boos and hisses and a lot of squirms of embarrassment recently when he told the Overseas Press club that he'd like to have journalists continue to feed information to the CIA.

The statement indicated how far removed from reality the CIA and Bush remain after revelation in recent Congressional hearings and elsewhere that the CIA and FBI have used newspaper reporters as informants.

The chagrin that met Bush's remarks at the Overseas Press club was generated by several factors. One, that certain newspaper and other media reporters had compromised their professional positions by serving as informants. Two, that the isolated instances of such informing has created the impression that such spying was widespread. Three, that Bush had the temerity to bring up such an embarrassing topic at a gathering of newspaper people. Four, that Bush still has no concept that there's anything at all wrong with such practice — that, indeed, the "crime" was in being discovered.

For many years, we've been told that Soviet diplomatic representatives in this country, Soviet commercial representatives and newsmen for the Russian agency Tass invariably lead a double life; that they also are members of the secret police, or spies, or both. Most people believed it, and still do. The Russians, in turn, have charged that practically every American assigned to diplomatic, professional or commercial duty in Moscow is a CIA agent. We've scoffed at this.

Now, it turns out, the CIA has indeed had informants in jobs where it has suspected it. Perhaps we should have, but

we didn't. Those of us in the newspaper business felt, particularly, that while American governmental employees abroad have an obligation to pass along information to their superiors — information that might ultimately wind up in CIA or National Security Agency files — we didn't believe for a minute that there were newsmen reporting surreptitiously to the CIA. Such a link is completely inconsistent with the newsman's job of reporting information to the public.

The revelation that some newsmen — however few — have been on the CIA payroll has done untold damage to the position of trust and credibility that a reporter and a newspaper must maintain in order to perform their news-dissemination task effectively. A recent CIA report of an impending climatic change throughout much of the world presents a case in point. The CIA said that meteorological

statistics indicate that the world's temperatures will dip slightly over the next several decades. This could cut crop yields in subsistence-level countries enough to produce famine, starvation and consequent political and economic upheaval. The CIA estimate might be a good one ... but the CIA's credibility today is such that few will take it seriously.

The same loss of credibility attends the reporting of newsmen who permit themselves to be compromised as spies and informers — for the CIA, FBI, NSA or whatever.

Rejection of informer roles for reporters isn't a matter of rejecting any large citizen responsibility in a governmental system that may be threatened by the world around us. Instead, it's a necessary course of action to make sure the democratic system continues to work.



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